

**OPENING SPEECH BY MR TAN KOK YAM, CHIEF EXECUTIVE,
SKILLSFUTURE SINGAPORE & CHAIRMAN, INSTITUTE FOR ADULT
LEARNING COUNCIL, AT THE ADULT LEARNING XCHANGE 2024, 18
JANUARY 2024 (THURSDAY), 9.05AM, RAFFLES CITY CONVENTION
CENTRE**

Professor Robbie Goh, Provost, Singapore University of Social Sciences

Associate Professor Yeo Li Pheow, Executive Director, Institute for Adult Learning

Distinguished guests

Ladies and gentlemen

1. I am delighted to be here this morning with all of you. I would especially like to extend a warm welcome to our overseas participants, and also to thank the speakers over these two days for being our catalysts for further dialogue and exploration.
2. When it began in 2008, this event was called the Adult Learning Symposium. Then, a community of researchers and practitioners has found it necessary to come together, exchange notes, share research ideas, to advance the field of adult learning.
3. Today, 16 years on and eight iterations later, I believe we have even more to discuss, and an even greater need, for such a platform. The Forward Singapore report, a nationwide consultation exercise that was held in 2022 and 2023, has made it clear that SkillsFuture is to be a key pillar of our social compact. Technologies will come and go, rapidly. Jobs, tasks and skills requirements will disappear, morph, reinvent themselves, at an increasingly breath-taking, sometimes frightening, pace. But every working adult will have access and opportunity to upskill and reskill, so that they are ready and able to progress, they are not left behind. That is the meaning of SkillsFuture as a key pillar of the social compact.
4. Realising this goes well beyond fiscal investment in adult education and training, even though money is never unimportant. It requires that we implement a form of adult

learning that builds confidence – confidence from the individual that he can now accomplish a new task, master a new application, or transit to a different career; confidence from employers and companies that this individual is able to get the job done, even if he is not the “thoroughbred” worker with the perfect set of paper qualifications and past work experience; confidence from society that we can progress collectively, even if rapid changes will affect each of us, in our different roles, differently.

5. What do we need to achieve such a form of adult learning, such a form of SkillsFuture?
6. First, the adult educator is key. She may be a university lecturer, a private sector trainer, or a company instructor. But in her role as adult educator, she is the one that empowers other working adults to progress. She has to master both the subject matter, and the method of effectively transmitting this mastery to others – the andragogy.
7. We need the adult educator to be at her best, through continual professional development, constant improvement, and close appreciation of the industry context. We also want the best from each profession to be adult educators, perhaps not all on a full-time basis, but to expend time to train, guide or tutor others. These are the individuals that will build confidence in others, to enable them to “*learn well*”, to borrow from the theme of the conference.
8. Second, research and innovation must be key. Institutions, indeed the entire adult education system, cannot use old ways to train new skills. That is putting new wine in old wineskins. Li Pheow has more than once shared with me about the challenge of heterogeneity in the adult learning classroom. Adults, of widely varying ages, backgrounds, aptitudes, and levels of motivation, are sitting together, grappling with a topic. How can we use a blend of personalisable digital technology and the human educator to overcome this heterogeneity?

9. Or, on the subject of workplace learning. What can companies do to develop their manpower or workforce effectively, and how do companies benefit from such investment? What kinds of companies benefit the most?
10. These are but a subset of the many critical questions that we want to address with confidence, with robust experimentation and data, and with clear research that leads to implementation. Importantly, and as my two examples suggest, the research and innovation will need to draw from multiple disciplines, including labour market economics, psychology, business research, and increasingly, AI application. The adult education sector must “*learn wide*”, again borrowing from the conference theme.
11. Third, the learner and their employer are key. We need to “*go deep*” with the engagement of learners and employers. They are not passive recipients or beneficiaries of training, but need to be given a hand to shape the lifelong learning system. The learner is the best person to ask about quality of the learning experience. Whether the lesson has been effective or relevant, whether the material is comprehensive or perhaps too comprehensive. We then use this feedback to continually enhance our programmes, even cull away ineffective courses when we have to. This is similar to the continuous user testing and adaptation adopted in modern software design. In Singapore, we are putting in place a comprehensive nation-wide adult learner feedback system to achieve this effect.
12. Employers have multiple roles to play. They signal to the labour market and to their own employees by focusing on skills in their hiring and internal deployment. They invest time and resource in enabling their workers to train and upskill. They adopt best practices so that informal learning at the workplace is optimised. By closely engaging our employers, they become more confident both in the value of training and skills to their business, and their own ability to do training well for their workers.
13. In its national role as the centre of excellence in adult learning, the IAL will need to be a driving force in all these three areas that I cited. It will need to augment and continually raise the quality of the corp of adult educators. It will need to advance

research excellence & research translation in the field. And it will need to advocate for a joint ownership of our lifelong learning system, with individuals and with companies, by engaging them in meaningful collaborations, and by providing thought leadership on the role of adult learning in society.

14. The IAL will obviously fail if it tries to do this on its own. Perhaps its most urgent task is to anchor and grow a network of national expertise and capabilities in adult learning, across our various institutions. Different institutions should take the lead in workplace learning, in cyber-physical learning, competency-based learning or the conduct of adult education to specific groups such as seniors. We all come together as a network to support the entire sector.

15. Nor is there reason to believe that such a national network is sufficient. Singapore has much to learn from the experiences and experiments of other societies and jurisdictions because we face fundamentally the same challenge of helping our workforce manage rapid technological adaptation. We ourselves should not be shy about sharing both our successes and our mistakes to the international community.

16. Which brings us back to the Adult Learning Xchange, and why we must continue to invest in it, and engage in it. In an era where machine learning is making leaps and bounds, across the world, we must collectively make sure that we are no less confident in our ability to enable human learning.

17. With this, I wish all of you a fruitful time at this conference. Thank you.